

SAMPLE COMMENTARY

EXODUS - PART ONE: LIBERATION FROM SLAVERY

Chapter 1: Oppression of the Israelites in Egypt

Then a new king, who knew nothing of Joseph, came to power in Egypt. He said to his subjects, "Look how numerous and powerful the Israelite people are growing, more so than we ourselves! Come, let us deal shrewdly with them to stop their increase." (vv. 8-10),

The king of Egypt told the Hebrew midwives, "When you act as midwives for the Hebrew women and see them giving birth, if it is a boy, kill him." (vv. 15-16)

The opening verses of Exodus pick up where Genesis leaves off. It tells us that after Joseph dies, his family and his brothers' families "became so numerous and strong that the land was filled with them" (1:6).

Verse 8 tells us that a new King comes to power in Egypt who knows nothing of Joseph. Because he fears the growing number of Israelites, he sets in motion a plan to oppress them by means of forced labor. When that doesn't work, he orders the midwives for the Hebrew women to kill off all male-born children. When that fails, Pharaoh commands all his subjects "to throw into the river every boy that is born to Hebrews" (1:22). These verses are intended to show how badly off the Israelites were when Moses was born.

Chapter 2: Birth of Moses and Flight into Midian

"Pharaoh's daughter came down to the river to bathe, while her maids walked along the river bank. Noticing the basket among the reeds, she sent her handmaid to fetch it. On opening it, she looked, and lo, there was a baby boy, crying! She was moved with pity for him and said, "It is one of the Hebrews' children." Then his sister asked Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and call one of the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" "Yes, do so," she answered. So the maiden went and called the child's own mother. Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will repay you." The woman therefore took the child and nursed it. When the child grew, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, who adopted him as her son and called him Moses; for she said, "I drew him out of the water." (vv.5-10)

In the ancient world, stories of great leaders were marked by the special circumstances of their birth. "The circumstances around Moses' birth alert us to the special place he will have in God's plan for Israel's deliverance. It is no coincidence that Saint Matthew, who painted a portrait of Jesus as the new Moses with his Gospel, told an equally ironic yet marvelous rescue of another endangered baby boy (see Matthew 2)." (William Parker C.S.S.R.)

Because of Pharaoh's new decree to kill all Hebrew infants, Moses' life has been in danger from the beginning. He is saved twice, first by his own mother, and subsequently, by Pharaoh's daughter. Verses 7-11 relate the adoption of Moses by Pharaoh's daughter and paying his mother to raise him. "This arrangement results in having the villain, Pharaoh, caught in his own trap. It is not simply anyone who rescues the baby boy – it is Pharaoh's

own daughter" (John Cragham). God is working "behind the scenes" to, first of all, protect his future leader from death and, secondly, provide him with an education that will prepare him for his future role in God's plan.

Pause: Moses' rescue by Pharaoh's daughter was considered an act of "civil disobedience." How do you feel about people who engage in "civil disobedience"? What issue(s) might cause you to feel that way?

Moses flees to Midian (2:11-22). Though raised in Pharaoh's court, Moses is told about his Israelite ancestry. One day, while out and about, he witnesses how badly his people are being treated and he also notices an Egyptian striking one of his kinsmen. He becomes enraged and kills the Egyptian, believing no one has seen the event. His action makes him an enemy of his own people and of Pharaoh who now wants him killed. Fearful for his life, Moses flees to Midian, an area in the Sinai Peninsula. He goes into exile, becoming a stranger in a strange land, but his formation for his future mission continues. While out in the desert, Moses is welcomed by an owner of sheep named Jethro, into his home. Jethro gives Moses his daughter Zepporah in marriage, as well as a job tending sheep. So almost overnight, Moses' life changes dramatically. The young prince of Pharaoh's court suddenly becomes a minder of sheep out in the desert. In his book *Set My Exiles Free*, Fr. John Power writes: "So Moses, brought up in the luxury, lust and laziness of the Egyptian court, now leads the life of a poor, hard-working shepherd. This primitive existence, close to nature and in the silence of the desert, was a preparation of the spirit for the great function he was to fulfill in the salvation story. Just as the first period of his life was a providential preparation in the material elements, so this second period was a providential preparation in the spiritual elements. Because here, in the desert of Midian, Moses found God" (p. 41).

Commenting on this chapter in Moses' life. The Catholic Bible, Personal Study Edition (p. 64), states: "The story of Moses presents some striking contrasts and fascinating ironies: He is an Israelite, but his name and upbringing are Egyptian; the pharaoh orders the killing of all male Israelite babies, but by doing so he sets in motion the very circumstances that bring Moses into the royal family; his mother abandons Moses in order to save him, but later is hired to be his wet-nurse; Moses kills an Egyptian to protect one of his own people but soon is forced to flee because he fears betrayal by one of his own; the one who threatens to betray him angrily asks, 'Who made you ruler and judge over us?' and 40 years later, that's exactly what Moses becomes; after fleeing, Moses takes refuge among foreigners and there, rather than with his own people, he encounters the God of Israel."

Verses 23-24 tell us how the Israelites groan and cry out to God because of their slavery. This prepares us for the call of Moses to be God's instrument in his work of liberating the oppressed slaves.